
Review

From Conflict to Cooperation? The Fall of Assad and the Prospects for Reconfiguring Water Diplomacy in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin

Pietro Giacomo Secchi

Università Statale di Milano

Corresponding Author Email: piersecchi@gmail.com

Received: 23 March 2025 / Revised: 11 April 2025 / Accepted: 20 May 2025 / Published online: 06 June 2025

© The Author(s) 2025

Abstract: The Tigris-Euphrates River basin, shared by Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq, is experiencing a critical water crisis driven by environmental degradation, geopolitical rivalry, and insufficient transboundary governance. This study examines the intersection of hydro-politics and regional instability, focusing on Türkiye's use of water infrastructure as a strategic tool and Syria's internal transformations following the 2024 collapse of the Assad regime. Using a qualitative case study approach, the paper analyzes the impact of the Kurdish question on water negotiations and recent shifts in Syrian governance that may open avenues for renewed cooperation. The findings indicate that the continued securitization of water discourse constitutes a significant barrier to effective transboundary management. Accordingly, the study advocates for the de-securitization of the water agenda as a critical prerequisite for building the foundations of long-term cooperation.

Keywords: Tigris-Euphrates basin, water conflict, Kurdish question, transboundary governance, Türkiye -Syria relations, hydropolitics

1. Introduction

The Tigris-Euphrates River basin, shared by Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq, is facing a deepening water crisis fueled by climate change, unsustainable resource use, and protracted geopolitical conflict. This region once the cradle of civilization is now at risk of ecological collapse and humanitarian disaster, with projections from the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources warning that the Euphrates could run dry by 2040 [1]. Despite the growing urgency, efforts toward cooperative transboundary water governance remain stalled, hindered by security-driven narratives and entrenched rivalries, particularly between Türkiye and Syria. This paper explores how the securitization of water has obstructed cooperation, and how the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 presents a pivotal opportunity to reset regional hydro-politics. It examines Türkiye's use of water infrastructure as a strategic tool, the role of Kurdish actors in shaping water disputes, and the evolving post-Assad political landscape in Syria.

The central argument is that de-securitizing the water discourse, removing it from the military-security domain and reframing it as a socio-economic and humanitarian challenge is a necessary first step toward durable cooperation. This introduction outlines the paper's contribution: a case-based analysis of recent political shifts in Syria

and their implications for water diplomacy in the Tigris-Euphrates basin, concluding with policy recommendations centered on trust-building, international mediation, and gradual institutional alignment toward a trilateral water-sharing framework.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the evolving dynamics of water governance in the Tigris-Euphrates basin.

2.1. Data Collection

Primary and secondary sources were analyzed, including:

- Official statements, agreements, and policy documents from regional actors (Türkiye, Syria, Kurdish administrations)
- News reports and interviews from credible regional and international media outlets
- Academic literature on transboundary water governance, hydro-politics, and water conflict transformation
- Reports from international organizations

2.2. Analytical Framework

The study applies a critical geopolitics lens to understand how water is framed and instrumentalized as a strategic asset. It also incorporates insights from hydro-political securitization theory, focusing on how states embed water issues within broader national security concerns.

Key themes guiding analysis include:

- The securitization of water in Turkish Syrian relations
- The role of Kurdish actors in transboundary water politics
- The implications of the Syrian regime change for regional water diplomacy

2.3. Limitations and Scope

Given the evolving nature of events in post-Assad Syria, the research is limited by the availability and reliability of recent data. Bias was mitigated through cross-verification of reports and triangulation of sources.

3. Results

3.1. *The Kurdish question as a crucial point in the water dispute between Türkiye and Syria*

The Kurdish question lies at the intersection of national sovereignty, ethnic identity, and resource politics in the Tigris-Euphrates basin. The Kurdish population—spread across Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, and Iran has historically inhabited territories intimately linked with the headwaters of both rivers. This geographical overlap has had profound implications: the rivers not only sustain Kurdish agrarian and pastoral livelihoods but also serve as strategic assets over which state authorities seek control. Water, in this context, becomes both a lifeline and a tool of domination. Since the 1970s, Türkiye has strategically integrated water infrastructure development into its internal security agenda, particularly in relation to the Kurdish population. The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), launched in the 1980s, epitomizes this dual-purpose approach. With 22 dams and 19 hydroelectric power plants, GAP is not solely a developmental initiative; it is also a mechanism for state consolidation in Kurdish-majority areas [2]. On the one hand, it aims to reduce regional poverty and stimulate economic growth, ostensibly

to diminish local grievances and undercut recruitment for anti-state movements. On the other hand, its infrastructure physically transforms the landscape in ways that restrict the mobility of insurgent groups most notably the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Türkiye classifies as a terrorist organization [3]. Moreover, the GAP's social and cultural impacts have been significant. Entire Kurdish communities have been displaced by dam reservoirs, and numerous archaeological sites tied to Kurdish heritage have been flooded. These consequences have led many observers to interpret the project as part of a broader policy of cultural assimilation, where state-sponsored modernization is interwoven with ethnic marginalization [4].

At the transboundary level, the construction of GAP's upstream dams has substantially altered the hydrological regime of the Euphrates and Tigris, with direct consequences for downstream riparian states. Syria and Iraq have repeatedly voiced concern over reduced water flows, especially during drought periods. These reductions have undermined agricultural output, compromised municipal water supply, and heightened social vulnerability in already fragile areas. Türkiye's control of upstream infrastructure has also granted it significant geopolitical leverage, prompting some analysts to describe the country as a regional "water hegemon" [5]. This position of power has not only influenced Ankara's diplomatic posture but also shaped the security landscape of the region. In the 1980s and 1990s, Syria responded to perceived Turkish dominance by providing logistical and political support to the PKK [6]. Damascus granted safe haven to PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and facilitated sabotage campaigns against GAP-related infrastructure. These actions contributed to a deepening rift between the two countries and stalled diplomatic negotiations under the Joint Technical Committee (JTC), which met sixteen times between 1980 and 1993 without producing a formal water-sharing agreement [7].

The situation escalated dramatically in the late 1990s, with Türkiye threatening military intervention if Syria did not stop the support for the militia. The standoff culminated in the Adana Agreement (1998), a security pact under which Syria agreed to withdraw support for the PKK and expel Öcalan, who was later captured by Turkish intelligence in Kenya [8]. Notably, this period of heightened tension also saw the collapse of regional water negotiations, underscoring the extent to which hydro-politics and ethnic security concerns were—and continue to be—intertwined. Although a temporary détente emerged in the early 2000s, including plans for joint projects like the "Friendship Dam" on the Orontes River [9], cooperation once again deteriorated in the wake of Syria's civil war. The emergence of the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES), spearheaded by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and supported by the United States, significantly altered the power dynamics. Türkiye interpreted Kurdish territorial consolidation in northern Syria as a direct threat, given the ideological and organizational ties between the SDF and the PKK. Ankara's concerns intensified following the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and renewed PKK attacks targeting GAP infrastructure [10].

Under such pretexts, since 2019 Türkiye has escalated military operations in Syria, often in cooperation with Turkish-backed militias. These incursions have frequently targeted Kurdish-held territories and critical infrastructure. Türkiye has been accused of deliberately reducing water flows along the Euphrates and its tributaries, particularly the Khabur River, and of conducting airstrikes and sabotage operations against dams, pumping stations, and power plants [11]. These actions have contributed to the worsening of already dire humanitarian conditions in the Kurdish-majority regions.

In sum, the Kurdish question has become a strategic axis of Türkiye's regional water policy, where hydro-politics and national security are deeply enmeshed. The weaponization of water through both control of flow and destruction of infrastructure has reinforced geopolitical asymmetries and perpetuated mistrust. It also underscores the urgent need for institutionalized, multilateral frameworks capable of decoupling water governance from broader security conflicts.

3.2. Three months of transformations

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 brought about by a coordinated offensive led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and affiliated factions marked the end of five decades of dynastic rule and signaled a seismic shift in the regional balance of power. The ascent of interim leader Ahmad al-Sharaa ushers in a fragile transition, tasked with rebuilding a country shattered by civil war, economic collapse, and mass displacement. Central to this reconstruction effort is the challenge of restoring state authority over fragmented institutions and regaining control of essential resources, notably energy and water infrastructure. Water, already politicized in the pre-war period, has become even more contentious in the post-Assad landscape. While the new government prioritizes lifting international sanctions and asserting central governance, it must navigate a complex terrain of de facto autonomous zones and competing political agendas—particularly in the northeast, where the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have established entrenched administrative and military structures under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

One of the most consequential developments in this uncertain period has been a dramatic shift in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. In March 2025, Abdullah Öcalan the imprisoned PKK leader held by Türkiye since 1999 issued an unexpected public appeal from prison, calling for the dissolution of the PKK and a transition from armed struggle to democratic political engagement [12]. While this announcement generated cautious optimism among some observers, reactions among Kurdish factions have been far from unified. Elements within the SDF and its YPG backbone expressed skepticism, viewing Öcalan's proposal as out of step with ongoing military threats and insufficient to address longstanding grievances. Nonetheless, the statement opened a narrow window for regional de-escalation. Furthermore, a landmark agreement was reached on March 10, 2025, between the HTS-led interim Syrian government and the SDF [13]. The accord outlines a roadmap for joint oversight of key border crossings, oil fields, and water infrastructure in northeast Syria, while granting a degree of administrative autonomy to Kurdish-held regions. Importantly, the agreement commits both parties to preventing territorial fragmentation and jointly resisting remnants of the Assad regime. Though still in the early stages of implementation, this power-sharing arrangement represents a great shift toward institutional integration. However, the agreement's long-term viability is far from assured. In April 2025, a major political conference in Qamishli brought together over 400 Kurdish political and civil society actors, where participants reaffirmed their support for a democratic, decentralized Syria [14]. While the conference explicitly rejected full independence, it advocated expansive autonomy and formal recognition of Kurdish self-governance. For Damascus, this position risks contradicting the March accord's emphasis on territorial unity and may be interpreted as a step toward federalism or even partition.

From Ankara's perspective, any form of Kurdish political consolidation, whether administrative, military, or symbolic, constitutes a strategic red line. Capitalizing on the power vacuum and the ambiguities of the nascent Syrian-Kurdish arrangements, Turkish forces have escalated airstrikes, reconnaissance missions, and incursions

into northern Syria. These operations have systematically targeted critical infrastructure underpinning Kurdish civil governance, with a particular focus on water and energy systems. One of the most emblematic flashpoints has been the Tishrin Dam on the Euphrates River a vital asset for both hydroelectric power generation and water supply across northeast Syria. On April 12, 2025, in an attempt to defuse tensions and prevent further escalation, the Syrian Democratic Forces and the interim Syrian government reached a tenuous agreement to conduct joint patrols around the dam, while retaining its civilian administration under Kurdish oversight [15].

Simultaneously, Türkiye has tightened its grip on transboundary water flows, unilaterally restricting the volumes of the Euphrates and Khabur rivers entering Syrian territory. These reductions have severely undermined water access for irrigation, domestic consumption, and electricity generation in Kurdish-majority regions. The humanitarian consequences have been immediate and profound. Local authorities and international observers have condemned the move as a violation of established water-sharing principles [16], while aid agencies report rising incidences of waterborne illnesses and widespread energy shortages. Far from stabilizing the region, Türkiye's water-based coercion has further deepened the humanitarian crisis and entrenched regional volatility.

4. Discussion

The findings underscore the complex interdependence between hydro-politics, regional security, and ethno-political identity in the Tigris-Euphrates basin, with the Kurdish question emerging as a central axis of contestation. In this context, water has transcended its traditional role as a shared resource, becoming a strategic instrument of power projection particularly for Türkiye. Through extensive infrastructure development and the politicized manipulation of river flows, Ankara has effectively securitized water, reinforcing asymmetric power relations with downstream actors and using access to water as a means of exerting pressure on Kurdish-majority areas and their allies.

This securitization has not only disrupted transboundary cooperation but also exacerbated humanitarian vulnerabilities in conflict-affected regions. However, the collapse of the Assad regime and the subsequent emergence of a transitional Syrian government offer a rare window of opportunity to rethink the basin's governance architecture. The March 2025 agreement between the interim government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), while still fragile and contested, signals a potential realignment. By integrating Kurdish-held regions into a unified, though decentralized, Syrian political framework, this agreement could help reposition Syria as a more coherent and capable actor in regional water diplomacy.

Crucially, the normalization of relations between Damascus and the SDF may help shift the water conflict from a largely bilateral (Türkiye-Kurds) standoff into a more institutionalized, multilateral framework of engagement. If sustained, this reconfiguration could support the emergence of a regional governance model that addresses both resource-sharing and identity-based grievances—two issues that have historically fueled instability. However, this potential remains highly contingent on Türkiye's willingness to move beyond unilateralism and engage in substantive dialogue with both state and non-state stakeholders.

4.1. Policy Recommendations

The persistence of unilateral water control measures, particularly by Türkiye, underscores the need for formal, legal frameworks for cooperation. In the long term, a trilateral agreement on the collaborative governance of the Tigris-Euphrates basin incorporating Iraq remains an essential strategic goal. Achieving this will require a gradual approach, focused on fostering mutual trust and a paradigm shift from viewing water as a security threat to treating it as a shared resource for sustainable management. Hence, the following transitional measures are recommended for Syria in the immediate term:

De-securitization of Water Discourse:

One of the key objectives for the nascent Syrian government is to de-securitize discussions around water management with neighboring riparian states. Water issues must be detached from the military-security domain and re-framed as socio-economic challenges essential for regional cooperation. This shift can be initiated through a memorandum of understanding or a joint declaration with other riparian states, establishing a foundation for future legally binding agreements. Given the Tigris-Euphrates basin's socio-political complexities and competing interests, such a de-securitization phase is crucial to pave the way for more meaningful cooperation.

Supporting Interventions:

- **Joint Declarations:** During this transitional period, it is vital to signal a commitment to regional stability through joint declarations. These should explicitly acknowledge the water crisis, the impact of climate change on water resources, and the shared nature of these challenges for all riparian states. Emphasizing the mutual benefits of cooperation in managing these resources could also serve to align priorities and strengthen trust.
- **International Community Engagement:** Engaging the international community—through supranational organizations and third-party states—can play a critical role in facilitating the de-securitization process. External mediation, support, or guarantees can help foster cooperation and ensure that water management becomes a collaborative effort rather than a geopolitical tool.

5. Conclusion

The Tigris-Euphrates basin is at a critical crossroads, where escalating water scarcity converges with longstanding geopolitical tensions. While the region faces significant environmental and resource-related challenges, recent political shifts, especially the fall of the Assad regime and evolving Kurdish dynamics, offer a rare opportunity to reassess transboundary water governance. To foster sustainable and equitable management, it is essential to move beyond securitized approaches and embrace cooperative, depoliticized frameworks. Viewing water as a shared socio-economic resource, rather than a tool of geopolitical leverage, can facilitate bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Key to this transformation will be the de-securitization of water discourse and the adoption of trust-building measures, such as joint declarations and international mediation. The urgency is clear: without such efforts, the region risks crossing irreversible ecological and humanitarian thresholds.

References

- [1] Le Monde. Iraq's fertile valley is dying,
<https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2022/08/21/iraq-s-fertile-valley-is->

- dying_5994283_114.html#:~:text=In%20two%20decades%2C%20the%20cumulative,due%20to%20reduced%20surface%20water (August 2022)
- [2] Tomanbay, M. Turkey's approach to the utilization of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. *Asq* 22, 79–100 (2000)
 - [3] Jongerden J., "Dams and politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 17, N.1, 2010, p. 141
 - [4] Ökten, Ş. Environmental justice, dams and displacement in southeastern Anatolia Region, Turkey. *J. Int. Soc. Res.* 10, 414–419 (2017)
 - [5] Williams, P. A. Turkish hydro-hegemony: the impact of dams. In *Water and Conflict in the Middle East* (ed. King, M. D.) 42 (C. Hurst & Co., 2020)
 - [6] Wasinger, C. E. Peace be dammed? Water power and water politics in the Tigris–Euphrates Basin. *Honors Proj.* 39, 48 (n.d.)
 - [7] Kibaroglu, A. & Scheumann, W. Evolution of transboundary politics in the Euphrates–Tigris River system: new perspectives and political challenges. *Glob. Gov.* 19, 279–305 (2013)
 - [8] Dohrmann, M. & Hatem, R. The impact of hydro-politics on the relations of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. *Middle East J.* 68, 567–583 (2014)
 - [9] Kibaroglu, A. & Sayan, R. C. Water and 'imperfect peace' in the Euphrates–Tigris river basin. *Int. Aff.* 97, 149–151 (2021)
 - [10] Williams, P. A. Turkish hydro-hegemony: the impact of dams. In *Water and Conflict in the Middle East* (ed. King, M. D.) 67 (C. Hurst & Co., 2020)
 - [11] Al Monitor. Turkey-backed forces accused of cutting water to Syrian Kurdish-run region, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/02/turkey-backed-syrian-forces-block-water-ras-al-ain.html>
 - [12] CETIM, Rights Defense Initiative, Violations of the right to water in North and East Syria, https://www.cetim.ch/wp-content/uploads/Violation-right-to-water_N-S-Syria_ENG-1.pdf
 - [13] Pax for Peace. Killing the Khabur: How Turkish-backed armed groups blocked northeast Syria's water lifeline, <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/killing-the-khabur-how-turkish-backed-armed-groups-blocked-northeast-syrias-water-lifeline/> (November 2021)
 - [14] Al Jazeera. Will PKK leader Ocalan's call for group to dissolve end Turkiye conflict?, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/27/will-pkk-leader-ocalans-call-for-group-to-dissolve-end-turkiye-conflict> (february 2025)
 - [15] Al Jazeera. Syria merges Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces into state institutions, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/10/syria-merges-kurdish-led-syrian-democratic-forces-into-state-institutions> (march 2025)
 - [16] Xinhua. Kurdish conference in Syria concludes with call for unified political vision, <https://english.news.cn/20250427/5d9e38b43c0149978f03b06e44494230/c.html> (April 2025)
 - [17] Arab News. Syria's Kurds hold conference on vision for country's future, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2598534/amp> (April 2025)
 - [18] Middle East Eye. SDF withdraws from key Syrian dam after agreement with Damascus,

- <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sdf-withdraw-key-syrian-dam-after-agreement-damascus>; (April 2025)
- [19] France24. Syrian forces deploy at key dam under deal with Kurds: media, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250412-syrian-forces-deploy-at-key-dam-under-deal-with-kurds-media> (April 2025)
- [20] Greek City Times. SYRIA: Greece condemns Turkish attacks on Tishreen Dam, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2025/04/17/greece-condemns-attacks-syria/> (April 2025)
- [21] ANHA Hawar News Agency. Protests by residents of NE Syria continue to protect Tishreen Dam from occupation's attacks, <https://hawarnews.com/en/protests-by-residents-of-ne-syria-continue-to-protect-tishreen-dam-from-occupations-attacks> (April 2025)
- [22] ANHA Hawar News Agency, Energy Body warns of disaster as Euphrates levels decline, offers solutions, <https://hawarnews.com/en/energy-body-warns-of-disaster-as-euphrates-levels-decline-offers-solutions> (April 2025)
- [23] ANF News. Tishrin Dam in northern Syria on the brink of collapse due to water shortage, <https://anfenglish.com/rojava-syria/tishrin-dam-in-northern-syria-on-the-brink-of-collapse-due-to-water-shortage-79125> (April 2025)